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ABSTRACT

Much of the ongoing discussion about the scientific value of narrative research and the criteria for narrative research comes down to conceptions of the aims of educational research and what this means for an interest in the "truth." The growing number of publications about narrative research has resulted in warnings and criticism. One of the leading critics is D. Phillips (1993, 1996), who stresses the importance of ascertaining the correct narrative or narratives and asserts that narrative needs to be "epistemically respectable." Conflict arises from different views of the researcher's "voice" in narrative research and from differing conceptions of the "truth." New narrative research can be said to share the epistemological presuppositions of postfoundationalism, and this postfoundationalism can be distinguished from relativism or subjectivism. J. O'Dea (1994) has developed a notion of truth that can help narrative research gain epistemic respectability. Narrative researchers must render the realities of classroom practice faithfully and precisely. The narrative researcher can be truthful at three levels: (1) situation; (2) practitioner; and (3) researcher. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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Narrative research and the concern with truth.[1]

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Introduction

'Narrative inquiry' and 'narrative analysis' have recently been given considerable attention as research methods in human sciences, if one looks at the amount of publications in recent volumes of leading journals in the field of education and at the amount of AERA-presentations concerning this subject. Simultaneously, a discussion emerged between supporters and opponents concerning the value of this method.

In this paper, I argue that a great part of the ongoing discussion concerning the scientific value of narrative research and the criteria for narrative research in the end come down to conceptions concerning the aims of educational research and what this means for an interest in the Truth.
In order to show this I shall first present the attempts made by Polkinghorne and Casey to review narrative research. Secondly, in an nutshell I will give the main criticism made by D.C. Phillips concerning the scientific value of narrative research. Thirdly, I shall show how Phillips' criticism can be considered as an example of a conflict between different conceptions concerning the researcher's voice in different paradigms. Then I shall point at the epistemological assumptions underlying the use of a broad definition of 'narrative'. Finally, I will try to elaborate further the meaning of Jane O'Dea's work for the pursuit of truth in narrative research.

Narrative research in education

Polkinghorne (1995) uses the term 'narrative inquiry' as a covering concept within which he distinguishes 'analysis of narratives' and 'narrative analysis'. This is based on the distinction between 'paradigmatic cognition' and 'narrative cognition', made by Bruner (1986).
Polkinghorne uses this distinction to classify the wide field of narrative research.
The 'analysis of narratives' is an example of paradigmatic cognition. According to Bruner, one looks for common features in different cases in order to define them as belonging to a broader category. In the paradigmatic analysis of narratives the narratives form the research data. The researcher looks for common themes in the narratives.

According to Polkinghorne, 'narrative analysis' is an example of 'narrative cognition'. Bruner states that narrative cognition is focused on the specific and the particular aspects of each human acting. Where in the paradigmatic cognition the particular is put between brackets in

order to look for features that the phenomenon has in common with other phenomena, narrative cognition is focused on the particular. Paradigmatic knowledge is stored in conceptual frameworks, narrative knowledge is stored in narratives. In contrast with the paradigmatic cognition, the aim is not the identification of an episode as an example of a wider type, but to show the similarity with a remembered episode, still according to Bruner. In narrative analysis, the data are mostly not in a narrative form. The information comes from different sources. In the narrative analysis, the researcher arranges events and actions by showing how they contribute to the evolvement of a plot. The plot is the thematic line of the narrative, the narrative structure that shows how the different events contribute to the narrative. Where in 'analysis of narratives' the narratives are the source of knowledge, the narrative in 'narrative analysis' is the result of the research.

This distinction between analysis of narratives and narrative analysis has the advantage that it allows to classify the huge amount of research that is labeled as 'narrative research'. The disadvantage is that the distinction is based on a definition of 'narrative' that is not unanimously accepted. Polkinghorne (1995) uses as his starting point the distinction between a broad and a narrow definition of 'narrative'. In the broad sense, a narrative is "any prosaic discourse, that is, any text that consists of complete sentences linked into a coherent and integrated statement" (1995, p.6). In a more limited definition "narrative refers to a particular type of discourse, the story, not simply to any prosaic discourse" (1995, p.6). Now, for the demarcation of narrative inquiry, he uses the more limited definition. This means that a narrative can be distinguished from other verbal data.

Others seem to use a more broad definition. If we look at the way in which Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p.7) use the concept, we notice that 'narrative' not only means the story of the teacher, but also the entire research process and the researcher's narrative or interpretation of the research story. Their basic assumption is that human beings are "storytelling organisms" (1990, p.2). Narrative functions as a kind of metaphor for the human life. For these authors, narrative inquiry is much more than just the analysis of narratives. "The study of narratives, ...,is the study of the ways humans experience the world" (1990, p.2).
In her review article, Casey (1995) does not start from a definition of narrative. A striking feature of the article is the absence of formal criteria for the research data and the absence of a typical research design or method. This allows for a great diversity within the realm of narrative research and Casey gives an impressive list of what according to her is included in the overarching category of narrative research: 'the collection and analysis of autobiographies and biographies', *'Bildungsroman'*, 'life writing', 'personal accounts', 'personal narratives', 'narrative interviews', 'personal documents', 'documents of life', 'life stories', 'life histories', 'oral history', 'ethnohistory', 'ethnobiographies', 'autoethnographies', 'ethnopsychology', 'person-centered ethnography', 'popular memory', 'Latin American *testimonios'*, 'Polish *pamietniki'* (p.211).

She does make a distinction in using the term 'new' narrative research. She writes: "The narrative research to which I refer throughout this chapter is not termed "new" simply because

of its recent arrival. Its particular qualities, as defined above, are more significant than its chronology" (p.235). In a footnote she specifies that she "exclude[s] from this category those instances of life history research that simply seek to obtain more accurate *information* through more elaborate interviews while maintaining fundamentally positivistic, "old" frameworks of understanding" (p.240). On the basis of this description, one can conclude that for Casey much of what Polkinghorne calls 'analysis of narratives' is excluded from the new narrative research in education.
She states that the current enthusiasm for narrative research must be considered in the social and cultural context. According to Casey, the different strands of narrative research, each in a different way, give responses to the postmodern condition and "defie[s] the forces of alienation, anomie, annihilation, authoritarianism, fragmentation, commodification, depreciation, and dispossession" (p.213). It is also the result of demographic evolutions whereby till then silenced groups such as women, blacks, gays and lesbians get acccess to the academic world and can raise their voice. She sees as common features of narrative research the central position of the human as an actor and the central focus on meaning; the shift away from positivism and thus the rejection of "the idea that knowledge represents exactly the way the world exists outside of human experience and thought" (p.231); a "fundamental reconstruction of the relationship between the researcher and the subject of the research" (p.231); the explicit recognition of the way in which the researcher's own subjectivity influences the research process, the outcomes and the reporting. Often, narrative research is also characterised by progressive political intentions of the researchers who aim at a contribution to social change.

The use of the broad definition of narrative does not allow a demarcation of narrative research on the basis of characteristics of the research data or the research report (in contrast with the distinction made by Polkinghorne). If everything we say is a narrative than every kind of qualitative research uses narratives. As mentioned above, for a number of authors (Connelly & Clandinin, Casey and others) narrative inquiry or narrative research is not just a matter of the features of the data or the presentation of the results. For them, there is more at stake as can be seen in the list of features of narrative research.

The discussion concerning narrative research
The growing number of publications on the basis of narrative research lead to the publication of articles with remarks, warnings, criticisms and even severe attacks. One of the leading critics is D.C. Phillips. Phillips' criticism (1993, 1996) is the result of the "growing belief that epistemology is being blown away and replaced by politics" (1993, p.4). According to him "there are times when it *is* important to ascertain the *correct* narrative or narratives" (1993, p.7). He admits that "if what a narrative inquirer is concerned about is to understand conscious, voluntary, human action, that inquirer must ascertain the beliefs of the actor - that is, the beliefs that the actor truly holds (but they need not be beliefs that are true)", but "there are many cases in the social sciences (including educational research) where the beliefs - and resulting narratives - of the individuals concerned are not particularly insightful or causally enlightening" (p.9). And with respect to the political ambitions he writes that "Many, or

perhaps all, of the "political" points might be true - ... - but none of these points serves to establish that narrative *ought* to be regarded as trustworthy or deserving of a central place in educational research. ... Narrative needs to be epistemically respectable ..." (1993, p.10).

The researcher's voice and aims of educational research

There are several aspects in the discussion. In this paper I will focus on two of them. First, there seems to be a conflict between different conceptions concerning the reseacher's 'voice' or interests in educational research. Second, there seems to be a conflict between different views on the truth.

Using Guba and Lincoln's framework (1998), the discussion between Phillips and narrative researchers can be considered as an example of a conflict between different conceptions concerning the reseacher's 'voice' in different paradigms. Phillips seems to be in favour of a postpositivistic paradigm. According to Guba and Lincoln (1998), the postpositivistic inquirer's voice is "that of the "disinterested scientist" informing decision makers, policy makers, and change agents, who independently use this scientific information, at least in part, to form, explain, and justify actions, policies, and change proposals"(p.215). On the other hand, the narrative researcher's voice is "that of the "passionate participant" (p.215). The narrative researcher is actively engaged in a process of mutual telling, retelling and reliving stories. She hopes that this will ultimately lead to a retelling of the stories about the professional knowledge contexts.

In a similar way, one can distinguish between three major interests in educational research (Smeyers, 1998). There is research that tries to explain human conduct in terms of causes and effects. The aim is to predict and to manipulate human behaviour. In another strand of research the aim is to understand human action. And finally, educational researchers can strive towards a contribution in the change of the educational praxis. If she wants to do so in a scientific way, she must be able to justify why another way of acting is better than the actual one. Since this justification requires considerations on an epistemological, anthropological and ethical level, the link with philosophy of education becomes apparent (Smeyers, 1998).

For Phillips, the primary interest or the main aim of inquiry is explanation. He seems to be willing to accept some qualitative data if this can lead to a better explanation. And this is his background for judging the contribution of narrative research. Narrative researchers on the contrary are not interested in explanation but in understanding human behaviour. In order to do so, they listen to the stories of those who are involved because it is in these personal narratives that the meaning given to events, persons, situations and so forth will become clear. Since the caring relationship between researcher and practitioner is one of the features of narrative research, Connelly, Clandinin and Casey would admit that their ambition is *also* a political one. They hope that narrative inquiry will contribute to a change of the relations between theory and practice and a change in the professional knowledge contexts (Connelly & Clandinin, 1992). From this their proposal for "an engaging plot" as a criterion is understandable (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.8). One can imagine that a good, appealing

narrative has greater influence on change than a dull research report. If the possibility of reaching the aim of the research, i.e. the change, increases when criteria such as adequacy, plausibility and an engaging plot are met, why shouldn't we accept them? But Phillips writes that criteria like 'adequacy', 'plausibility' and 'an engaging plot' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.8) are scientifically and epistemologically irrelevant (1993, p.7).

The question is whether the criteria of validity, reliability and generalizability which have their origin in the first strand of research, should be used to criticise research in all three strands of research? Is it legitimate to transfer criteria from one paradigm to another? Connelly and Clandinin argue that criteria beyond validity, reliability and generalizability should be used to judge narrative research. But even research that does not belong to the (post)positivistic paradigm must give answers to epistemological questions. Although I accept the position that there is room in educational research for the three strands of research - if the researchers are willing to accept the limitations of the claims that can be made on the basis of the results [2]- the question is - as we have argued elsewhere - how 'change' could be focused upon without at the same time indicating where one starts from. Jane O' Dea (1994) wrote that: " ... wise responsible action ultimately depends [ ] on 'perception' - the ability attentively to take into account uncharted particulars and so, after keen deliberation, to decide the right course of action." She adds that the moral agent has the obligation to render reality precisely and faithfully since "only such a rendering will give one the information one needs to make the right choice" (p.170). In order to be able to make the right choice, the researcher first has to give a perspicuous representation of the present situation. This can only be obtained by careful, systematic study and a (self-)critical and (self-)reflective attitude. So the epistemological constraints pop up again. The narrative researcher has the task to tell the truth. But what counts as truth?

Epistemological presuppositions of the broad definition of 'narrative' and the concern with the truth

The use of a broad definition of narrative has in my opinion a far-reaching epistemological significance. Indeed, Casey writes that the shift away from positivism is one of the features of the new narrative research. So, the assertion that every verbal utterance is a narrative can be interpreted as the formulation of a position concerning the relationship between world and language. To say something about reality implies the use of language. Language is situated at the intersubjective level. We are always situated in an intersubjective context and one of the features of this context is the sharing of a common language. There is no position outside of language. This is what Wittgenstein meant in his famous dictum: "... the limits of *language* (...) mean the limits of *my* world" (1922, 5.62). Not only the stories of the concerned but also the researcher's narrative uses a language that is bestowed with meaning.

In this sense, new narrative research shares the epistemological presuppositions of the broad current of postfoundationalism. In a nutshell, this position comes down to the belief "that there are no foundations of knowledge, no grounds exterior to ourselves that guarantee the

truth of our factual claims, and no supra-human warrant for universal truths in the realm of ethics" (Blake, Smeyers, Smith, Standish, 1998). There is no position outside our language (or our form of life to put it in a Wittgensteinian way) that allows us to check whether the statements we make about reality are true or false. This would imply the existence of a method other than the scientific that can warrant the truth of our statements. Moreover, the explanation of the success of science is, according to Rorty, not to be found in a special relationship of correspondence between the objective reality and science. There is no need for a foundation of science that would provide more certainty than the scientific method itself (Burms, 1994).

I agree with Blake, Smeyers et al. that postfoundationalism is not the same as relativism or subjectivism. These authors state that the subjectivist twist "is to claim that meanings are just as private as experience. … Since knowledge is determined by the meanings available, and meanings must differ from person to person, what is "knowledge for you" and "what's knowledge for me" cannot be the same" (p.12). This is an untenable position in view of Wittgensteins' private language argument. "Who we are and who we become is determined by the things both said to us and, importantly, said about us" (p.13). Since there is "no transcendental ego or given subjectivity prior to an individual's immersion in the discourse of others , … one cannot view meanings as something generated primarily by the private, solipsistic self" (p.13). So, on an epistemological level, postfoundationalism does not mean that there are no constraints on meaning or knowledge, but that "the constraints are not foundations, ontologically prior to discourse, but the intrinsic constraints of critique itself, internal to discourse and intrinsically social" (p.30).

One of the consequences of this position is that the correspondence theory of truth here as elsewhere must be abandoned. This means we have to look for alternative conceptions of the notion of truth if we want to deal with Phillips' criticism.

Jane O'Dea (1994) develops a notion of truth that can help narrative research to gain epistemic respectability. She argues that even the employment of criteria such as "compellingness, accessibility and moral persuasiveness" (Barone, 1992, p.21) that traditionally belong to literature does not mean that there are no constraints on what can be said. She states that "truth would appear to play a much more central role in literary narrative writing than they [the narrative researchers] appear to acknowledge. Indeed the very criteria employed by them - ... - might all be seen to serve that very notion of truth" (p.162). The crucial notion is the concept of 'authenticity'. The concepts of honesty and truthfulness are connected to this latter notion. If literary writers are bound by certain limitations this is even more the case for narrative researchers. She claims that narrative research can get the epistemic respectability it seeks if the criteria such as an engaging plot are viewed within the context of the concept of authenticity. It is by espousing this latter notion that literary artists and narrative researchers can speak truths. "… they need to situate their stated criteria clearly within the confines of 'authenticity', connecting them thereby to that notion of truthfulness and honesty that authenticity entails" (p.169).

What does this mean for narrative research? Since narrative researchers are researchers and not writers of fiction, they are "bound to honour the settings inside which their research stories occur" (p.165). The narrative researcher should "strive to articulate faithfully and precisely the realities of classroom situations" (p.168). O'Dea sees three possible sources of lies in narrative research. First, the researcher can suppress the complexities of the classroom situation. Second, sentimentality can also seduce the researcher to aggrandize desirable features and to diminish or play down less desirable ones. Third, "insofar as the terms employed in the text do not accurately and fittingly articulate the actual lived experience, then the document is untrue, the writer is uttering a lie" (p.169) She concludes that "... if teachers' stories are indeed to be used as texts to guide the uninitiated, then they must be more than accessible, compelling and morally persuasive, they must offer more than animating, evocative descriptions of classroom events. In short, they must above all else be true and reliable, they must render faithfully and precisely the realities of classroom practice, and 'compellingness', 'animation', and so on, must serve only as means towards that end" (p.170). In answering Phillips she states that "the employment of literary narrative style [ ] does not in itself indicate a propensity towards manipulating the data" and that "one ultimately has to trust in the integrity of the scholar" (p.166). As Kvale (1994) puts it, a quest for validation may appear as an expression of general scepticism towards products of others, doubting everything which is said.

Although I regard narrative research as a potentially promising strand of research, I must admit that it sometimes has a tendency towards relativism and subjectivism. For example, in Witherells and Noddings' book "Stories lives tell. Narrative and dialogue in education", Joanne Cooper writes that "journal keeping is a powerful tool that combats the oppressions and repressions that prevent us from being fully present to ourselves" (p.107) and a little further she writes: "As diarists, we are all researchers of our own lives, researchers who withdraw to a special place, taking our myriad selves with us and writing up our observations" (p.110). In the same book, Brody writes that "one of the greatest challenges for professionals today is to guard against their own detachment – from themselves, from their community, and from those with whom they form particular relationships" (p.258). It seems as if we are all alineated from who we really are, and we can find who we really are by narrative research of ourselves. It seems as if these authors still believe in a given subjectivity prior to an individual's immersion in the discourse of others. I interprete these statements as misunderstandings of the emergence of meaning. I will elaborate this further.
In interpretative research it is acknowledged that human action is based on the meanings that particular contexts, events and situations have for the ones who are involved. If we want to understand human action (the second strand in educational research) we must take into account the meaning and the (self-)understanding of those who are involved. There are a number of instruments that allow the researcher to retrieve those meanings such as interviews, the analysis of personal documents like journals, diaries and so on. But where do these meanings come from? These meanings are not lying out there, waiting to be discovered by us. Meaning is not given. Meaning is constructed. But this construction of meaning is easily misunderstood. It does not mean that we can all construct our private meanings without

constraints.

As I mentioned above. The intersubjective context is prior to subjectivity. Intersubjectivity is necessary for the constitution of personal identity. We are from the very beginning situated in a form of life, in an intersubjective context and one of the features of this context is the sharing of a common language that is bestowed with meaning. This common language is our inevitable starting point. Wittgenstein (1958) clearly showed that the position in which it is claimed that each of us can construct her or his own meanings that we afterwards try to attune with the meanings of others is untenable. One cannot at the same time repudiate the very notions of foundations of knowledge and re-install the idea of the individual as the sovereign subject of knowledge (Blake, Smeyers, Smith & Standish, 1998). Rousseau, in search of who he really was, already concluded in his 'Confessions' that if he wanted to eliminate everything – including language – that came from the others (since all of this had to be alienating), there was nothing left to be described, no given subjectivity (Larossa, 1998).

The construction of private meanings is also a misinterpretation of authenticity. O' Dea (1994) writes that people can be inauthentic or untrue to themselves when they "choose to ignore or shrug off the facts that delimit them - "the limitations of their thrownness" - and deceivingly conceive of themselves, their situations or their goals, in terms that are utterly unrealistic, that indulge a tendency towards fantasy or wishful thinking "p.165). One of the aspects of this thrownness is the priority of the intersubjective context. And the priority of the intersubjective context has far reaching consequences for what can be said. Again, postfoundationalism is not relativism or subjectivism. The fact that there are no ultimate foundations for knowledge, that there are no universal truths or values independent of ourselves, does not mean that there is nothing we can say or, in the ethical realm, that anything goes. In the epistemic realm, that we gave up the correspondence theory of truth does not mean that we have to give up truth as such. That there is no point from where we can check the truth of our claims by looking for a one-to-one relationship between what we say about reality and reality as such does not mean that we cannot say anything. There is still the *truth for us*. And so, our knowledge claims have to be accepted by the others that share our language, that are engaged in the same discourse. As Bruner (1996) wrote: "a perspectival view of meaning making does not preclude common sense or 'logic'" (p.14).

How can the narrative researcher speak the truth in the sense of truth for us? And how can the narrative researcher be authentic, honest and truthful? I shall try to elaborate these claims on three levels. The first level is the level of the situation. In my opinion, as educational researchers, we ought to give right answers to good questions. Since educational research has the ultimate ambition to ameliorate a given situation (be it the improvement of teacher education or relief in a problematic situation), the research questions need to have relevance for educational practice. To be authentic on this level means that the researcher ought to do justice to the situation. In order to do so, she must search in collaboration with the practitioner for what is at stake in a given situation, hereby putting her own interests between brackets. The faithful and precise articulation of the reality of classroom life is a necessary condition to achieve this.

On the second level, we ought to do justice to the practitioner. This can be done if researcher and practitioner together try to formulate the appropriate questions to be answered. In other words, researcher and practitioner ask the questions that must be answered in order to do justice to the practitioner. In this way, practitioners recognise the questions as their questions although they have been formulated in collaboration with the researcher. Good answers to these questions are the kind that indicate possible ways of legitimate action without any guarantee of success.
Finally, the third level is the level of the community of researchers. To be honest and truthful here means that the researcher should engage in a dialogue with the community of researchers. This should lead to the formulation of the relevant justifications of the given answers. On the other hand, the researcher should show how her or his research is a manifestation of and a contribution to the ongoing discourse of the relevant community of researchers. The importance of this third level is also aknowledged by Mishler (1990) when he writes that the key issue is "whether the relevant community of scientists evaluates reported findings sufficiently trustworthy to rely on them for their own work" (p.417). It should be noted that authenticity in research on the three levels requires an engagement in a dialogue.

One can still ask what criteria are to be met. But one of the central features of interpretive research in general and narrative research in particular is that it aims at a perspicuous representation of a particular context. As a consequence (different from research in the hypothetico-deductive strand of research), the appropriate methods and criteria cannot be developed in separation of the specific object and context (Levering & Smeyers, in press). In general, the research report should convince the reader that the researcher proceeded in an careful, systematic, (self-)reflective and (self-)critical way. An authentic attitude as described above should guide the researcher.
Once again, the constraints on what counts as research are intrinsic constraints of critique, internal to discourse and intrinsically social (Blake, Smeyers, Smith & Standish, 1998).
If narrative researchers succeed in doing justice to the situation, to those who are involved and to the community of researchers, in short if they succeed in being authentic researchers, their research stories can have epistemic respectability and can be accepted as truth.

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1. I thank Paul Smeyers for his evocative comments on an earlier version of this text.

2. The research in which human behaviour is studied in terms of causes and effects is based on the methods of the natural sciences. This kind of research has in my view only limited relevance in educational sciences. There is room for this kind of research in as far as human behaviour is determined by the fysical and chemical processes. For the study of human action this method is not suited. If one wants to understand human action, the meanings for those who are involved and their (self-)understanding have to be taken into account.